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Israel hits PLO camp at sensitive time, with King Hussein in US

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Israeli jets bombed Palestine Liberation Organization headquarters Tuesday in a suburb of the Tunisian capital, 1,200 miles from Israel.

Israeli military sources took pains to say that the raid was in retaliation for the slaying last week of three Israeli civilians on Cyprus. They estimated that the bombing raid killed 30 to 50 people.

The strike comes at a politically sensitive time. King Hussein of Jordan is in Washington and has publicly reaffirmed his commitment to pursue jointly a peaceful settlement to the Palestinian problem with PLO chairman Yasser Arafat.

"This certainly serves notice to the King," said one Western analyst. Israel has warned Hussein about the PLO's growing presence in Jordan.

In Washington, White House spokesman Larry Speakes said that, from what was known so far, the raid was "a legitimate response and an expression of self defense."

In a Tel Aviv press conference after the raid, Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin said the time had come for Israel to strike at those responsible for decisionmaking in the PLO as well as at guerrillas. Mr. Rabin dismissed the idea that the raid could damage the peace process, saying that he believed PLO terrorism was the main factor jeopardizing chances for peace in the region.

Egypt, however, immediately announced that it

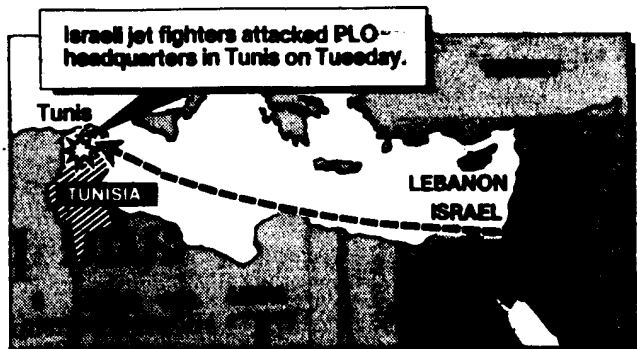
had suspended talks with Israel aimed at settling the border dispute between the two countries, and it condemned the air raid as a criminal act.

Israeli officials across the political spectrum have joined in recent days to denounce the PLO as a terrorist organization that is unacceptable as a negotiating partner in any peace talks.

Israeli officials had warned that the shooting deaths of the three Israeli tourists would be avenged. The three men — two Palestinians and one British citizen — who shot the Israelis on board their yacht in Larnaca said they were not associated with the PLO. The PLO offices in Nicosia denied the men were PLO agents. Israeli intelligence, however, insisted the men were part of an elite PLO commando group called Force 17. According to Jordanian television, the commander of Force 17, Abu Tayyab, was killed in Tuesday's attack.

According to Israeli intelligence sources, Force 17 is under Arafat's direct control. Responsibility for the murders was claimed by anonymous callers to news agencies who said Force 17 carried out the action. Force 17 also has claimed responsibility for several other attacks on Israelis, including a shooting attack on a bus traveling in the West Bank last weekend which injured four people.

The wave of acts against Israelis in Israel and the territories it has occupied since 1967 has put pressure on the government to strike against terrorism. It is likely that a



majority of Israelis will approve of the Tunisian raid.

But the raid surprised most analysts here. Israel has never before attacked Tunisia, a strongly pro-Western Arab state. Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba allowed the PLO to establish its headquarters in Tunis after Israel forced the guerrilla organization from Beirut in 1982. News reports then said that the United States administration was instrumental in winning Mr. Bourguiba's acceptance of the PLO leadership in his capital.

The PLO presence in Tunis since 1982 has been limited almost exclusively to offices, and the Tunisians have tightly controlled the movement of PLO officials in the country. The Israeli military communiqué issued after the air raid said that it had bombed buildings in the Hammam-Shatt suburbs, an area it described as "under the full control of the PLO in Tunis." Diplomats inter-

viewed in Tunis, however, have repeatedly said that the Tunisian government keeps tight control over the PLO and strictly regulates its presence in the capital.

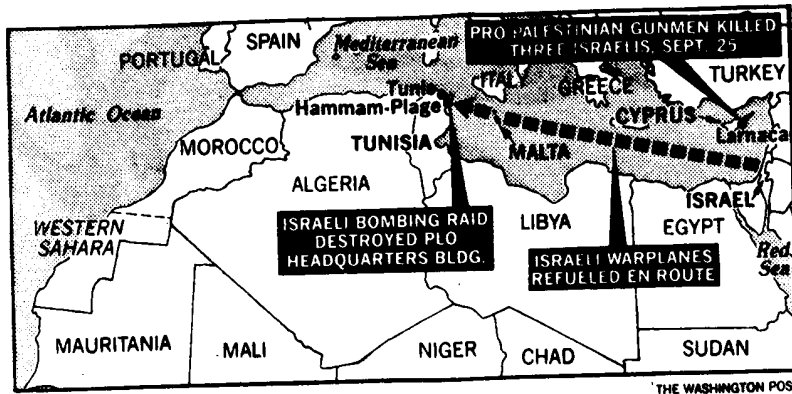
One Western analyst speculated that Israel chose to strike at Tunis "because they couldn't hit Jordan," while King Hussein was in Washington.

Since Hussein agreed last February jointly to pursue a peaceful settlement with Arafat, the PLO administrative presence in Amman has increased. In the past two months, Israel has issued several warnings to the King that it believes the growing presence of the PLO in Jordan is destabilizing the West Bank.

During Hussein's visit to New York and Washington, Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres has cautiously welcomed the King's public statements that he wants to negotiate peace directly with Israel "under appropriate auspices." But the prime minister repeated again Tuesday that Israel will not negotiate with the PLO.

Hussein has told the Reagan administration that the PLO is becoming more moderate and has accepted the notion of negotiating peace with Israel. The King has pushed hard for the Americans to meet with a joint delegation of Jordanians and PLO-designated Palestinians.

President Reagan and Secretary of State George Shultz have balked at including the PLO in any negotiations until that organization renounces terror and formally accepts Israel's existence. In a weekend television interview, Mr. Shultz acknowledged that the question of PLO participation in the process was still a point of contention between the Americans and the Jordanians.



In a mission comparable to today's for precision and surprise, Israel rescued a plane-load of Israeli hostages at the Entebbe, Uganda, airport, 2,200 miles from Israel on July 4, 1976, but it used an airport in neighboring Kenya as a staging area.

The pinpoint precision of today's raid was reminiscent of some Israeli bombing during the siege of west Beirut in 1982. Then, several buildings thought to have been regularly used by Arafat were regularly destroyed—sometimes within minutes of his reputed departure—while adjoining structures were left untouched.

Diplomats credited the Israelis with almost perfect timing, noting that Israeli intelligence apparently had learned that Arafat, ever wary

and secretive about his travels, had flown back from Morocco only last night.

Palestinian sources said the Israeli raid today should silence Arafat's critics among the PLO dissidents who have accused him of wanting to sell out to Israel by entering peace negotiations with King Hussein of Jordan.

In the attack cited by Israel as provoking the retaliatory raid, three Israelis—two men and a woman—were killed in their yacht in Larnaca, Cyprus, by three pro-Palestinian gunmen, who are now in Cypriot custody. Israel has blamed Force 17, and a caller to a western news agency in Jerusalem claimed responsibility for the slayings on behalf of Force 17.

But Arafat's wing of the badly split PLO has denied responsibility for the killings, and one of the gunmen told reporters, "We belong to no organization."

The government of Cyprus said Monday that from its investigations and interrogation of the three alleged assailants, one of them a Briton, "so far, no evidence has emerged leading to the conclusion that some organization" was involved. Some Palestinians later charged that the Israelis were espionage agents, but Cypriot officials have said they have found no evidence that they were.

Diplomatic sources warned that the United States might be accused of collusion with Israel in the raid. They reasoned that many Tunisians would question whether the U.S. 6th Fleet, which is reported to be off the Tunisian shore as a show of support for Tunisia in a current dispute with Libya, had been able to detect the Israeli intruders and could have alerted Tunisia.

Military sources noted, however, that unless the Israelis had been detected at higher altitudes while still in the eastern Mediterranean, even sophisticated equipment aboard the U.S. vessels would have had trouble picking up the Israeli aircraft in their low-level approach.